



BLOOD ON THE PAGE

The age old relationship between designers and editors

Dr. Doolittle's Pushmepullyou is alive and well. Evidence of its existence can be found on any spread in any highly illustrated book. It is found in the creative tug-of-war between the editor and the designer over that most valuable of commodities, space. Illustrated books are often design lead, being sold on their looks, yet they are only as valuable as their editorial content. A good book is where both editorial and design are in harmony working towards the same creative goal.

In many cases this does not happen. The design/editorial team can be working from two different agendas, one visual, one striving for clarity and education. This can lead to conflict if each side is too possessive, if one side is stronger or if the company culture favours one over the other. The revolution in technology has seen the creation of virtual teams, where the designer, editor and publisher are not only not in the same room, but sometimes not on the same continent. It has also seen a blurring of the roles: designers can edit and editors can redesign. If the team, virtual or not, is not working effectively as a team then problems arise.

This scenario was often put down to the old cliché of personality types, with the designer as the artist-dreamer while the editor is detail obsessive. The editor usually holds the overall vision of the project, while the designer can have a whole spread rewritten as they obsessively move an image millimetre up or down. These very different personalities can be formed into a team, and that is the role of the third member of the team, the project manager. The clash between editorial and design can happen when the individuals are unclear of their respective roles. An established team usually has a defined working relationship, but a new one needs help building that relationship. This is especially true if the team is a virtual one.

When coaching and building a team there are three simple, but important questions that need to be asked: WHO? WHAT? HOW? These questions have to be dealt with at the inception of the team. The team must establish early on WHO they are, as individuals and as a unit. It is important that they meet, either virtually or physically as soon as the project will allow and define their team roles. Who is responsible to whom needs to be addressed at this point.

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WHAT is the project? Here the project manager has to have established a common and clear vision. The design/editorial team have to share that vision and know the design/editorial balance, with all members of the team working towards a common goal. Unclear thinking at this point can lead to clashes later on.

If the project manager is unsure at this stage that the designer and editor are sharing the same vision, there are some simple coaching techniques he or she can use to check. Firstly get the designer and editor to write down in a few sentences how they see the project. Next get them to write down how they define the roles of the other members of the team. Then question each party on how they feel about each other's role. At this early stage fault lines within the team can be spotted and acted on. The project manager can spend time coaching the team so they reach an agreement on their roles within the project and pursue a common agenda towards the completion of the book.

HOW will the team work together? A common agreement can be worked out within the team on how the designer, editor and project manager will cooperate on a practical and creative level. Routes of communication need to be established and the knowledge that issues will be acted upon needs to be reinforced. The schedule is imposed from above, yet the creative team will need to be allowed to discuss and input their own working methods so that they can feel included. Information must be shared and all parties must be updated at key points of the project. Collaboration is important so the team work as a team, not as individuals.

The tug-of-war between the designer and editor can be very creative. Ideas and concepts need to be challenged and the project manager can sometimes have an uncomfortable ride between the two parties. If the tug-of-war is allowed to break down into warfare then no one can win. But, early planning and coaching by the project manager can lead to a positive working relationship where potential disputes become creative compromises. For the team great collaboration can lead to great creativity.